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ABSTRACT

This paper examines ways in which early childhood education can provide the vital foundation for lifelong attitudes and values toward the democratic process. One goal of early childhood education is to empower the social bonding which brings collaborative relationships to their full potential and gives the child a sense of connectedness to others. In every program there are two levels of curriculum--that which is implicit, the level of life itself, our daily actions; and that which is explicit and planned with conscious goals. In many cases democratic principles are better experienced at the implicit level through the modeling of teachers in their interaction with their young students. Viewing learning and growth as developmental processes, the teacher can practice shared decision making and consensual group governance on levels appropriate to the child's state of development. For example, if the children make plans for a birthday party, they can experience, even at four years of age, joint planning, airing of diverse thoughts, and movement toward consensual resolution under the guidance of a teacher. (Author/DE)

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DEMOCRATIC GROUP PROCESS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD CURRICULUM

by

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Introduction

Early Childhood as a discrete, a particular, and, an important era in human development and in education has by now been clearly established. There are early childhood sub-divisions in departments of education, early childhood majors in degree programs, early childhood concentrations in courses in human development. There remain, however, important segments of our population - to be convinced, people who vote on school issues, people who decide how policy decisions should be made, people who view the early years as simply times for eating, sleeping, playing.

This paper will be directed to the purpose of demonstrating that early childhood provides the vital foundation years for life-long attitudes and values. One primary strand in the range of humanistic values, that of democratic process, has been chosen to demonstrate the possiblity - indeed, the necessity, of laying foundations for ultimate goals early in life. Further, the paper will illustrate educational practices which can and do express the values embodied in democratic philosophy.

The paper will begin with a brief discussion of the nature of young children and some characteristics of early schooling, then continue to goals for early childhood education, with democratic process as one important derivative of larger goals, and end with corresponding practices in the early childhood years.

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Development as a Central Concept in Education

Central to any thinking about education, and, in our case, the education of young children, must be the concept of development and the principles which derive therefrom. Development means an unfolding, over a period of time, in an orderly, sequential manner, of capacities and potentialities inherent within the organism in its interaction with the larger field of existence, i.e., realms of environment, from social to ideational, to physical. Rarely are these various realms seen and experienced separately; more often they seem almost hopelessly intermeshed and we are constantly confronted by the torturous and pedantic task of having to separate them out for the purposes of analysis. Difficult as this task may be, the concept of development, in its differentiated strands, is central to any discussion of young children.

The Nature of Young Children

Young children, for the purposes of this paper, are between the ages of three and seven. They've lived very few years and are small people in size, two significant features. Young children are active explorers of their immediate world, going from that which they can observe to that which is not observable, from that which is totally involving to that which is more and more abstract, from that which requires the whole body to know to that which is learned verbally or inside of one's head. Young children want to and can build up a huge body of data about their environment. As they begin to see patterns and meanings in their world, they gain a sense of mastery and control over their ever-expanding lives.

The physical nature of the young child in his/her relation to living and learning is paramount. Piaget postulates the first developmental era as

"sensori-motor" and sets the parameters for this period between the ages of infancy and approximately seven. Children come to experience the world through their bodies and their senses. They encompass physical objects and situations from large to small, from concrete to abstract, from simple to complex. They use jungle gyms, slides and swings for large motor coordination, small blocks, paint brushes, the stringing of beads for small motor coordination, primary materials such as sand, water, clay and paints for expression and recreation of experience and its meanings.

Young children, because of their few years of life and their small size, are highly dependent upon very few primary nurturing figures--"parents" or surrogates, powerful adults who provide first and major models for human existence--who teach the young, by example, a range of feelings, thoughts, activities and aspirations which will set the direction for the child's whole life and lay down the intricate foundation of attitudes and values.

Thus, when the young child enters into a first school experience, it is with intense exploratory drives and unbounded energies mediated through physical-sensory activity combined with tremendous dependents upon the grown-up world for nurturance, protection and guidance.

Early Schooling: First Model of The Larger Society

Early schooling provides the child with his/her first experience of a secondary group. In a school classroom group there are many children (peers) to few adults. Thus early schooling has the major task (explicit or implicit) of providing the young child with a model of a social group, i.e., a society. Theodore Lidz compares the terms of acceptance of the child at home and in school. At home, biological determinants, age, sex, sequential position, create

and sustain conditions of acceptance. He is his parent's child; the first-born, youngest, only boy or girl, the sickly, the healthy one, etc. He writes:

> "As part of a group of children of the same ages, he is often treated as part of the collectivity rather than with the individualized attention to which he became accustomed at home. He must forego many of his desires and mask his idiosyncrasies in order to fit into the group. The teacher has an obligation to evaluate him on the basis of his achievements and, eventually, according to impersonal scales. Both in school and in the neighborhood his conferes are rivals--often harsh judges who are more likely to rub salt than salve in emotional wounds. In these altered circumstances, in these new environments, and in relation to new significant figures, the child's personality will undergo considerable reorganization and he will develop new abilities to prepare himself to live within the larger society rather than simply within his family." [1]

In order then, to think about principles and practices of education for young children, we need to touch back constantly into the nature of the child, and the nature of his experience of moving into a larger world.

Pre-School Education: Goals

Because the pre-school setting provides the basic larger-order societal model, stated goals and ensuing practices for early childhood curriculum are of paramount importance. The following goal statements, influenced by the richly synthesizing works of Barbara Biber and Elizabeth Gilkeson, both of Bank Street College, set forth a humanistic vision of life in relation to self and others.

Early Childhood programs must in the broadest sense seek to:

1. bring competence to the highest possible levels, to support

Goals (cont'd)

the potential for mastery in the physical-motor, social emotional and intellectual domains; such attributes as openness, curiosity, exploratory modes, trust in the environment, are basic to the movement toward mastery and feelings of competence.

2. nurture individuality and individual styles of learning in ways that contribute to feelings of worth, to the capacity for emotional investment, and building of a separate identity; such phrases as "centering of self", "connectedness of self", viewing and feeling ofsself as unique, yet similar to others all support this goal.

3. empower the social bonding which brings collaborative relationships to fullest potential-to support and extend feelings of connectedness to others-in particular over common tasks and agreed upon goals.

4. nurture and sustain creative processes of thinking, relating to self and others, to environmental situations, and to differentiated domains of internal processes. [2]

Foundations of Democracy in Early Schooling

From larger goal statements derived from basic values, we spin out multiple strands relating to principles and practices of education. One such strand relates to the third goal--of connectedness to others--which gets further refined to relate to issues of participation, interaction, role, status and communication in groups. We make no pretense of being neutral in regard to these issues. We are not neutral. We are believers in democratic process as inherent to healthy group life.

Democratic Process

What are the salient attributes of democratic group process? Two spheres of influence exist; interaction between peers and interaction between peers and leaders. In a democratic group, the nature of peer group interaction is

Democratic Process (cont'd)

collaborative, reciprocal and mutual. The group adds to the individual, the individual adds to the group. Dewey writes of the "numerous and varied points of shared common interest being intrinsic to a healthy group".

> "A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. The extension in space of a number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, is equivalent to the breaking down of these barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity." [3]

He sums up the characteristics of democracy as:

> "the widening of the area of shared concerns, the liberation of a greater diversity of personal capacities." [4]

Lewin, Lippitt and White in what are now considered to be the classic experiments in group process, point out that there is no one prototype of democracy. There are many varieties depending upon situational and personality variables. [5] What of the nature of leadership in a democratic group? Leadership must emerge from the peer group, agreed to by "consensual validation", by rational means. Power derives from the group's strength, not from brute force, physical or mental, of one over many, but from the force of consent, each out of many. Leadership emerges by virtue of experience and wisdom, by force of responsibility and responsiveness, by commitment to the social "good", to the welfare of the larger community.

It is in the extension of this point--"the widening of the area of shared concerns, and the liberation of a greater diversity of personal capacities..." that we move to discussion of freedom of speech, of opinion and of action. John Stuart Mill, in his essay On Liberty, writes of the overwhelming import-

Democratic Process (cont'd)

ance of divergent opinions in a free society--of the need to hear people out-to refine and test the capacities for thought that are inherent in human life

> "...mankind are not infallible; that their truths, for the most part, are only half-truths; that unity of opinion, unless resulting from the fullest and freest comparison of opposite opinions, is not desirable, and diversity not an evil, but a good, until mankind are much more capable than at present of recognizing all sides of the truth, are principles applicable to men's modes of action, not less than to their opinion. As it is useful that while mankind are imperfect there should be different opinions so it is that there should be different experiments of living; that free scope would be given to varieties of injury to others; and that the worth of different modes of life would be proved practically, when anyone thinks fit to try them. It is desirable, in short, that in things which do not primarily concern others, individuality should assert itself." [6]

Democracy in Practice: Levels of Curriculum

What has this to do with the education of the young? Of those small people, egocentric, overwhelmingly active, curious, outgoing, but certainly far from being active collaborators?

In every program there are two levels of curriculum, that which is implicit, the level of life itself, our daily actions, and that which is explicit, planned, with conscious purposes directed towards articulated ends.

In our discussion of democratic group process, we are dealing with both levels, but even more importantly, in early childhood programs, with the implicit, with the level of life itself.

This paper is directed to the intention of bringing to sonsciousness, implications of our every action, in order to move towards "informed actions", to bring more losely into line stated values and daily behavior.

Explicit Level of Curriculum

Curriculum refers to content and the learner's ways of learning content. Powerful content rests on principles of universality, immediacy and multi-meanings, particularly meanings related to self and others. Thus, in order for young children to learn about democracy, concepts related to democracy must be embedded in material highly related to the young child's experience. For example, stories about family life, in which families come to decisions jointly, plan activities mutually, share leadership appropriately, respect differences inherent in individuals, understand and elevate the collective good in daily life, are rich subjects for early learning. Such books as THE BIG WORLD AND THE LITTLE HOUSE, [7] and THE PLANT SITTER, [8] illustrate some of these principles.

Another type of content for teaching of democratic principles would be plans for events--parties, trips, a parent's visit. When young children plan together, think through real problems to real solutions, again share leadership roles, they are learning democracy.

Democratic principles cannot be learned didactically. They must be experienced in the actual learning process and through the modeling of adults-i.e., teachers in their interaction with the peer-members of the group, i.e., the children. Here we are referring to the implicit level of curriculum, the level of daily action-spontaneous, random, complex.

Implicit Level of Curriculum

How do adults model democratic leadership when the group members are not equal to the adult--i.e., when they are very young? We have seen the confusion and bankruptcy brought about when adults take peer roles, abrogating all

Implicit Level of Curriculum (cont'd)

responsibility for establishment and maintenance of limits and controls. Chaos ensues, or we get a "Lord of the Flies" situation, power going to whichever bully emerges, or we find energies dissipating in a paralysis of lethargy and anxiety.

The teacher must take an effective role in setting and sustaining the limits of the classroom society. Viewing learning and growth as developmental processes, the teacher practices shared decision-making and consensual group governance on levels appropriate to the child's stage of development.

Examples:

1. When the teacher makes a decision about when the group will go up to the roof for play, she/he shares her/his thinking about why and how this decision was made.

2. If the children and the teacher disagree about, for instance, more ice-cream for desert, the teacher can help the children to find alternatives to an either-or situation. In this case, perhaps there is not enough ice-cream for seconds at this time, but children might wish to make ice-cream for themselves, to bring money for ice-cream snacks, to request, from the school, a special treat once in a while, etc.

3. If the children make plans for a birthday party, they can experience, even at four years of age, joint planning, airing of diversethoughts (emergent opinions), movement toward consensual resolution under the guidance of a teacher.

4. If two or three children have an argument in block-building, the teacher works with them to get them to resolve conflict by airing opinions, seeing different sides, coming to closure in a compromise solution.

Viewing learning and growth as developmental processes, the teacher understands that young children's arguments about who is boss - "I'm boss of these blocks", "I'm boss of this bus", "I'm boss of this lunch table", must be accepted as the beginning of struggles over power and authority. Such struggles, by their nature, psychological, sociological, political and economic, are life-

long issues of concern to individuals, groups and nations. The immediacy as well as ultimate implications of such struggles are felt in early childhood settings as well as in any and all others. The importance of helping children understand the nature of power, the need for rational sharing of power, the responsibility of each person to processes of governance and shared decision-making, i.e., the uses of power, begins in early childhood and should continue throughout the school years.

The full flowering of healthy and rational social/political process, that which we refer to here as democracy, does not spring, full grown, like Venus from the head of Zeus, but rather, develops slowly, imperceptually, like the physical organism, nurtured and cultivated by continuously reflective, responsible, caring elders, in our case, teachers.

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